last article

WILDERNESS COURAGE

By

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Marie and Terese, daughters of Little Cheesie, chief of the CaribouvEater tribe, whose hunting-grounds ~~lay~~ lie east of Fort Fitzgerald in Northern Alberta, had been living at the mission of the Black Robes. Out in the deep pine forests where her people toiled for the pelts of otter, marten and glossy silver fox, their mother had passed to the Great Beyond the previous winter. Now these two motherless children, but seven and eight years of age, were to accompany their father into the wilderness ~~and~~ to try, in their own small way, to make up for the loss of the kindly, dark-eyed woman who had tanned his skins, kept the wigwan fresh with clean and fragrant spruce boughs, and visited the rabbit-snares in the spirit-haunted woods to fill the pot.

"Ho-ho! Marie! Ho! Terese" The hunter nodded to the heavy bundles awaiting transfer to the narrow birch-bark canoe down at the water-front. Bending, Terese caught up a heavy load, swung it on her small back, slipped the tump-line across her forehead and staggered down the slope beneath the burden. Behind her paddad Marie, bending beneath a load heavier than her own slim,supple body. In their wake strode the tall, spare form of the chief carrying a muzzle -loader in his hand.

It was my first year in the North. To me it seemed so cruel to be taking these wee mites from the comforts of the warm wooden school, to thich they had become accustomed, back into the

wilderness to work and slave.

Kelly, the trader, laughed. "It's all part of the training. From the time these kiddies emerge from the moss-bags on their mothers' backs they've got to do their share. Living so close to Nature one never knows when they may be thrown suddenly on their own resources. These two youngsters will take charge of their father's hunting lodge and chances are that many a bitter winter night, when the blizzards are howling down from the Pole and gaunt wolves are roaming the forests, they'll be alone in the wigwam while their father's on the hunting trail looking for moose or caribou to keep body and soul together, or gathering pelts with which to pay for those supplies I've just given him in debt."

I shook my head. The sight of the children going off so bravely, their small lips set as they staggered beneath their burdens, somehow raised a lump in my throat. From the top of the bank I watched the departure of the aboriginal brigade. The whole Caribou-Eater tribe was leaving. All along the river-bank Indians, squaws and children were loading up the yellow birch-barks. For some distance they would follow the crooked Dog River, poling up the froth and spume of thundering rapids, portaging the canoes and goods at times upon their backs, at other times wading knee-deep in gripping muskeg, branching off along one serpentine channel after another till they reached their ancestral hunting-grounds. There they would erect their conical caribou-skin lodges, and while men and boys hunted and fished, the squaws and their daughters would be kept busy visiting the rabbit-snares and sewing caribou skin moccasins and garments with which to resist the frigid rule of the Frost King. Finally the last

canoe disappeared into the dark maw of the Dog River.

Soon winter was upon us with all its Arctic fury. The trees and rock-ribbed ridges were buried beneath a mantle of soft, shimmering whiteness. Once in a whilw mahogany-faced Indians in caribou-skin parkas arrived from the mysterious brooding forests to barter their peltries for tea, sugar, clothes and ammunition. Hudson's Bay scouts brought word of a big fur-catch amongst the Caribou-Eaters, ten"sleeps" to the eastward. In the cold freezing store Mr. Kelly stealthily got together a trading outfit, making no fire lest the free-traders find out and follow. Then, like thieves in the night, swarthy fur-runners drove their loaded sleds out of the fort with sleigh bells silenced, the dogs tugging silently at the traces. And John James, our interpreter, went with them.

The days became shorter and shorter. Outside the mercury froze in the thermometer and trees burst asunder with reports like cannon-shots. Food and water froze overnight in the house. It was one of the severest winters known to the oldest Indians.

Somehow my mind wandered back to those two little girls away off there in the frozen forest. I could picture the two mites facing the bitter cold in their caribou-skin dresses, setting their snares, cutting wood to keep alive the wigwam fire, and bending beneath big loads of faggots as they snowshoed through the silent woods. I saw them breaking a hole in four-foot ice with ice chisels before the hue of dawn was in the sky, and tending fish-nets with hands blue with cold so that the sleigh-dogs on which their father depended to visit his traps would be properly fed.

When John James returned from his sled-journey he told me he had seen them. The little family, he said, were

having a pretty hard time. Trapping was bad and the snow so deep that the father had had bad luck. And on top of this, the mighty caribou herds, upin which they depended so largely for food and clothing, had migrated in another direction. Some of the Indians farther east were starving. John had brought in a letter, written in those peculiar syllabic signs invented by the missionaries, asking the Mounted Police to send out supplies to enable them to fight of the spectre of starvation.

January came in with more frigid blasts from the pole. The whole countryside was locked in the bitter grip of winter. Even the fur-runners did not out into the snow-bound forests for fear the dogs' lungs would be nipped with the cold. Hardly a living soul moved around the fort. Deep in the woods the animals stayed in their holes and the red men hugged their wigwam fires.

I was thawing out a loaf of frozen bread when John James burst excitedly into the house, the fur of his hooded parka white with frost. "Indians," he shouted. "They're crossing the river with a dog-team....they're coming in at last."

Out on the ice a thin, serpentine line - a dog-team - was wprming its way slowly in our direction. But where was the driver?b In vain I looked for a tall, swinging figure, loping behind the sled, urging the dogs with snapping lash.

"Look!" John James was pointing at an up-ended mass of ice. Around it a dimunitive fur-clad figure was ploughing a furrow in the deep drifts with a pair of snowshoes, breaking trail for the dogs. Behind the dog-team moved another small form of equal size.

"Wah! Wah!" exclaimed John, "Them's Cheesie's daughters. Wonder what they're hauling on that sled?"

Slowly, with drooping tails, five emaciated dogs tugged the loaded toboggan up the steep bank in the wake of the small guide, while Terese, the driver, flourished a caribou-hide whip and urged them on. At last they drew up before the trading post.

A torrent of guttural Chipewyan fell from John's lips while Marie gazed at us with dark, mysterious eyes and answered in short, low monosyllables; her face blackened with frost-bite, her hair and caribou-skin parka white with frost.

"Well, John," I said. "what's wrong - what's happened to their father. Those kiddies shouldn't be travelling in here all alone?"

John turned a serious face. "Their father," his voice was muffled," is wrapped beneath the moose-hide cover on that slad. He'll never hunt for the Company again."

"What?" Mr Kelly cried as he emerged from the store.

"Yes," John continued," He died 'way out in the bush at their wigwam, eight sleeps to the eastward. So these children tied him on the toboggan and walked a hundred and fifty miles through the bush to bring him here to the fort so the Black Robes could give him Christian burial."

What an epic story of bravery and courage! Day after day those two children had toiled through the snow-bound wilderness on snowshoes, camping at night with nothing but thair slat-ribbed dogs and the glittering stars for company, snaring rabbits for food as they went along and sharing them with the sleigh dogs.

Kelly caught my eyes. "Remember what I told you. One never knows when these Indian chiodren may be thrown on their own resources. But this," and he shook his head," for sheer grit it's hard to beat!"